

From: Mutter, Andrew [mutter.andrew@epa.gov]
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Subject: News Article - "Shaun McGrath wearing new hat as DEQ boss" - Montana Standard

Shaun McGrath wearing new hat as DEQ boss

- [SUSAN DUNLAP susan.dunlap@mtstandard.com](mailto:susan.dunlap@mtstandard.com)

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Shaun McGrath, the new head of the state Department of Environmental Quality, was formerly regional administrator for the Environmental Protection Agency — at a time when the two agencies did not get along at all well. He says that's all in the past.

McGrath suggested the tension between the state and EPA which dogged Butte's Superfund for years was fueled by "personal conflicts" involving former officials.

McGrath, 58, was an Obama administration appointee when he oversaw EPA's Region 8, which includes Montana. He left with little fanfare two years ago after President Trump was elected.

The tension between DEQ and EPA historically was over the Parrot tailings, long-buried mining and smelting waste behind the Butte Civic Center. The state refused to go along fully with EPA's assessment of the Butte Hill cleanup because of what many called flawed science. EPA asserted in 2006 that the contamination in the aquifer would take 200 years to get to Silver Bow and Blacktail creeks.

There is evidence some contaminated sediment may have already reached the creeks. Some in the community still simmer with anger because the state has had to pick up the tab on removing the Parrot tailings waste after Gov. Steve Bullock acted unilaterally to set that cleanup in motion. EPA, under both the former Bush and Obama administrations and now the current Trump administration, has stuck to its guns and said the Parrot waste does not require removal. Yet excavation overseen by the state has shown even worse contamination than expected.

"I'm not burdened by the long history of baggage on these issues," McGrath said by phone from his new Helena office last week. "My approach is problem-solving. I want to understand the obstacles and getting to what success looks like."

McGrath says he works "in a collaborative manner" and focuses on "how to get to the end result. Personal conflicts happen in any work environment. I'm not going to allow myself or my staff to get bogged down in that stuff. It doesn't serve the public or the public interest."

McGrath replaces Tom Livers. In a state government reshuffle this fall, Gov. Steve Bullock, a Democrat, tapped McGrath for the job after he chose Livers to be the state budget director. Dan Villa, who used to be in that spot, replaced David Ewer, who retired, to oversee the Montana Investment Fund.

McGrath's first day was Dec. 3.

McGrath and his family relocated from Boulder to Helena just before his start date. He said he expects this to be a two-year time-limited job. Bullock term limits out in 2020 as Montana's governor.

"I will bring all the energy I can to make those two years as successful as possible," he said.

He doesn't intend to make any senior staff changes.

McGrath also won't have to recuse himself on Butte or Anaconda Superfund issues, though he led the region's Denver office for the EPA. Some in Butte have speculated that he might need to do so.

"The only thing I won't be able to do is lobby directly my former colleagues at EPA. I can tell my staff here to work with them to build strategy and suggest key people and to execute on that strategy. I can sign orders. I just can't lobby directly to EPA," he said.

There is a two-year "cooling-off period" on contracts, licenses, grants, enforcement action, and lawsuits that were within his purview as Region 8 administrator. But that period ends January 20, 2019.

McGrath is working with both DEQ and EPA attorneys to create a list of issues that require a "lifetime ban" due to "personal and substantial involvement." But he thinks that will have a small impact on his leadership of DEQ.

"I would say that here as administrator, the nature of the job is essentially a mile wide and an inch deep on issues. I don't believe that will come into play on that many of a number of issues, but we're still in the process of identifying that list."

This will be McGrath's first time to live in the Treasure State, but he visited often during his 14-year tenure as program director of the Western Governors Association in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

"I worked four years with EPA, so together, 18 out of 23 years I worked for Montana governors or with Montana governors and in that work, I traveled to Montana quite a bit. When the governor called and offered me the position, I said 'heck yeah.' Both my wife and I were very excited to come here," he said.

McGrath said he took time off after leaving EPA and then did some consulting work. He got to know Bullock while he was Region 8 administrator. The two worked together on a drought preparedness plan in the upper Missouri basin.

He said it brought together all the water users, which included a wide variety of federal and state agencies, on the upper Missouri basin and was a "proactive and collaborative effort."

"It's a great project," he said.

He said that at this point he has no set priorities for the agency. He's spending his days getting up to speed on the variety of regulatory issues DEQ oversees and also for the 2019 legislature, which is just around the corner.

"I have found in the two weeks I've been here, I'm so impressed with the quality of the DEQ staff. They are wonderful, very committed and passionate about what they're doing and highly professional," he said.

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Best regards,

Andrew

Andrew Mutter

Director, Office of Communication and Public Involvement
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Region 8 (Denver, CO)

Office: 303.312.6448
Cell: 720.520.3047

Twitter: [@EPARegion8](#)

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Webpage: EPA Region 8 (Mountains and Plains)